

## LANGUAGE AND RESISTANCE IN BRIAN FRIEL'S *TRANSLATIONS*

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims at revealing the close relationship between language and resistance by presenting the Irish language as an example. Taking Brian Friel's *Translations* (1980) as the point of focus, the study investigates the influence of English occupation represented by the English language, (the language of the occupation forces), on the Irish language which represents the voice of the occupied. The study tries to trace the relation between language as a marker of identity on the one hand; and language as a way of resistance on the other hand. The study concludes that Irish language doesn't have power even inside its home land, in addition to the fact that the Irish people show indifference to the use of their language in their daily life. This fact is represented through the symbolic process of translating the geographic Irish places into English language. The co-operation between the Irish citizens with the forces of occupation reveals a political unconsciousness, and a hidden approval of replacing the Irish language by the language of the "enemy"!

The study concludes that the translation process is of a symbolic significance since it reveals how much authority and power the colonizer has on the colonized. It also indirectly hints at the failure of any relations with the colonizer. This is concluded from the failure of the love affair between the English soldier and the Irish girl. To sum up, the study asserts the importance of language as a main element in the quest of the occupied countries for resistance and independence.

**KEYWORDS:** Post, Colonial Literature, Irish Drama, Language and Resistance, Language and National Identity

### INTRODUCTION

#### LANGUAGE AND RESISTANCE IN BRIAN FRIEL'S *TRANSLATIONS*

The issue of the Irish language has been related to sovereignty of the Irish identity and the national independence of the country. Few Irish dramatists realize the issue of language in their dramatic works. Perhaps the best example of this trend has been carried out these days with the tremendous efforts of Brian Friel. Not only does Friel advocate the use of Irish language, but he also probably makes it a major theme for his plays. *Translations* (1980) exemplifies Friel's handling the issue of language and the political awareness of the Irish people. As the title of the play suggests, *Translations* deals with language. Friel himself has also, emphasized that the main theme of his play is about "language and only language" (Klein, 2007, 90). Although language is the major theme in the play, this play is seen as a "history play" (Klein, 2007, 86). Language is vital because it is an important pillar of the Irish history; therefore, it is necessary to read this play against the historic background of Ireland. What Friel attempts to accentuate is that history should be written and documented so that people will not forget it if the colonizer attempts to erase any cultural aspects.

The issue of language is of a great importance; many Irish plays, which were written in the eighties, including *Translations* treat the influence of the Irish past on the present. The history of Ireland during the English occupation becomes a fertile soil for several Irish literary works. In this light, *Translations* studies this issue from a linguistic point of

view. Considering colonialism into considerations, some critics discuss the changes that resulted from occupation on the language of the occupied countries. However, this study tackles the issue of language from another perspective away from the linguistic analysis. Therefore, the study presents language as a tool of resistance and a marker of identity. Language can play a direct role in reviving and fostering the national feelings on the one hand, and resisting the occupation on the other.

The study presents this issue in one of Brian Friel's plays, *Translations* (1980) which discusses the attempts of the English occupation to "rename" the Irish geographical places in Irish language with an English version and consequently erasing the Irish cultural identity. Unfortunately, this act was undertaken by the co-operation of an Irish citizen with the forces of occupation. In conclusion, the study realizes that the process of translation is taken out of its linguistic frame to have a cultural dimension. It is considered as an act of betrayal to one's own language and therefore to his/her nation. This is the point that the study adds to the act of translation. Translating the names from the original language to the language of the enemy is an act of treason or disloyalty and it reveals a lack of national awareness.

## THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The play takes us back to a significant era of Ireland and focuses on the colonial relationship between Ireland and England. Taking the historical facts into considerations, Friel draws on Irish history as a source for his play. The plot of the play depends on a real event that takes place in the end of August 1833. Having this real historical event as a background for the play gives it a greater strength and validity which are considered two major factors for the play's tremendous success.

The play went back to an event in the past in 1833 in Ireland when the British government attempted to write a new map for Ireland by "changing" the names of the Irish towns and cities into English; this was "intended to provide an accurate map of the country with uniform anglicized (Mahony, 1998, 136).

As concealed in the play, the colonial attempts in Anglicizing Ireland depend on real historic events. England aims to "colonize the mind and the people as opposed to conquering land through brute force" (Morrison, 1998, 1). This fact was embodied in the play in the imperialists' English attempts in many forms: British survey of Ireland and the process of mapping, renaming and Anglicizing Ireland and spreading the English system of education. Going back to the historic facts, the records state that on June 1824 the Spring Rice Report was given to the British Government advocating a general survey of Ireland. J.H.Andrews has provided a detailed historical analysis of this survey; he says that the intention of the survey "though not important in a military point of view, recommends itself more directly as civil measure" (Andrews, 1993, 97). Actually, the renaming of the Irish places and the remapping of Ireland with an English version is seen as a clear act of colonialism. Referring to the play itself, Lancey, one of the major characters in the play, states that "a map is a representation on paper" (*Translations*, 1996, 405). Therefore, it is one of the colonizers' priorities to control every aspect so that Ireland will be Anglicized. In this light, the need to replace the names of the towns and cities with English is a means to fulfill the colonizers' policy of Anglicization. Thus, one can conclude that this representation from the colonizer is imposed on the colonized. Moreover, another instance mentioned in the play which depends on a historic fact is the English colonial attempts to impose their system of education on the Irish people; a system which attempts to erase the Irish language and replace it with English.

In "The Historical Context of Brian Friel's *Translations*", the writer states that "In 1831 Chief Secretary Stanley introduced a system of national education in Ireland where English was the sole medium of instruction" (Morrison, 1998, 1). This is revealed explicitly in the opening scene of the play when the students were ordered to attend school; the authority of law and the use of the English language were imposed by law; this fact is shown in the actions of

the play and explains the bewilderment of Jimmy, Bridget and Doalty: "And every child from every house to go all day every day, summer or Winter. That's the law (Translations, 1996, 395). Therefore, there is a close relationship between the play and the historical context. Thus, it is necessary to read the play within its historical context.

## LANGUAGE AS AN IDENTITY

Language is a major marker of one's identity; it reveals how far the people are aware of their history and culture. Actually, one of the major reasons for the popularity of Friel's *Translations* is related to the fact that it is considered as a "tough-minded play about the brutal actualities of cultural power" (Kiberd, 1995, 618-19). In this play, there is a great relation between language and identity. With regard to this point, Catherine Wiley highlights the relation between history and nationalism; she states:

All history, personal and cultural, is transformed as it gets written. What is remembered is not always what happened, and because history's actors are rarely its writers, memory does not always conform to the written page. Nations embellish their pasts for posterity just as individuals do; but embellishment becomes dangerous when it too seductively obscures irreversible historical facts (Wiley, 1987, 52).

In fact, Friel is aware of the divisions that worked inside the Irish society and thus, he looks forward to having a cultural unity in an attempt to achieve the national identity which can be described as a cultural rather than a political entity. Though he hints at an awareness of the failure of the political unity, yet he looks hopefully forward to a cultural one. Therefore, the language is seen as a solution that could give the Irish a common ground for an uncontradictory identity.

Friel echoes Yeats. Both of them share the same vision of the ability of language to create "a rival world" (Murray, 1993, 87). Murray states:

Friel's position recalls that stated by Yeats..., where Yeats feels torn between his 'hatred' for the English tradition and his awareness that 'everything I love comes to me through English; my hatred tortures me with love, my love with hate... Gaelic is my national language but it is not my mother tongue (Murray, 1993, 87).

Furthermore, the issue of language is important because it is related to "the depth of political unconsciousness" (Kiberd, 1996, 615). After all, "one of the first policies formulated by the Norman occupiers was to erase Gaelic culture. It was however, only in the mid-nineteenth century that the native language declined" (Kiberd, 1996, 615-16). Obviously, the language of any country is seen as a matter of identity, independence and "sovereignty". Irish dramatists, including Friel, present the issue of language as a "colonial situation" and therefore they "struggle" to restore their Gaelic language because, as Kiberd indicates, it charges them with "power" (Kiberd, 1996, 615). This national awareness is emphasized because it can be employed as a tool for resistance.

## LANGUAGE, COLONIALISM AND RESISTANCE

For many critics, Brian Friel is a deeply political playwright. In *Translations*, Friel elaborates the process of "degalicization" by his depiction of "the historic Irish speakers to dispel the nationalist- myth of past Gaelic purity, predicated upon the Romantic belief in an echt Irishness" (Boltwood, 1996, 578).

Taken in this entire tradition, *Translations* clarifies Friel's view of the language under colonial dominance. Referring to the text of the play, Hugh believes that English language is simply for "commerce", but it can not "really express us (the Irish)" (Translations, 1996, 418).

Ironically, the colonizer considers this process as a "translation" which is, at the same time, the title of the play, no matter what explanation is given; Friel; however, asserts one result: "Degaelicization", this attempt of the colonizer is to give his own perspective of the colonized in a form of imperialism. As mentioned in the play, Hugh realizes that the use of the old Irish language (The Gaelic) is seen as a reminder for the Irish people to be true to their roots and as a way of resisting colonialism: "Our only method of replying to ...inevitabilities" (Translations, 1996, 418).

Edward Said comments on such imperial representations as an "exteriority." Said argues that language itself is an "encoded system," which employs many devices to "express, indicate, exchange messages and information.... In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a re-presence, or a representation"(Said, 2000, 88).

Many critics consider Translations to be Friel's best play since it tackles the issue of identity in a linguistic form. The renaming of the Irish towns and cities with English ones is considered as a "rape of a country's linguistic and cultural heritage" (Boltwood, 1996, 578). This burden of the linguistic question is potentially related to the cultural identities; it links the play with the national identity because "language is the prime means of identification" of the Irish cultural identity (Mahoney, 1998, 131). Moreover, the colonizer's attempts to rename the Irish places with English ones present an "assumption" that "to name a thing is to assert one's power over it and that the written tradition of the occupier will henceforth enjoy primary authority over the oral memory of the natives" (Kiberd, 1996, 619). No doubt then the renaming of the Irish names with English equivalents asserts the power of English as a primary authority because it is the language of the colonizer; this point is clarified in the dialogue which is carried out between Yolland and Owen who carried out the process of translation:

**Owen:** That's better. Bun is the Irish word for bottom. And Abha means river. So, it's literally the mouth of the river.

**Yolland:** Let's leave it alone. There's no English equivalent for a sound like that.

**Owen:** What is it called in the church registry? (Only now does Yolland open his eyes.)

**Yolland:** Let's see... Banowen (Translations, 1996, 409-10).

From the previous extract, the colonial attempts to Anglicize Ireland are so apparent. Such acts are considered as a means of colonization since, as he argues, "the colonized is typically [supposed to be] passive and spoken for, does not control its own representation but is represented in accordance with a hegemonic impulse by which it is constructed as a stable and unitary entity" (Said, 2000, 299).

Apparently, it seems difficult to separate language from its national and cultural dimensions. Realizing the importance of language, Friel is able to assert the "substantial role [that] language plays in the representation of cultural and personal identity" (Germanou, 2003, 470). By introducing the Irish language as exposed to the dangers of the occupier's language, Friel expresses his rejection of the attitude that the Irish language is the "other" if compared with the English. In this context, the symbolic process of translation represents a "paradox"; in other words it reveals the "tension between near and far, in relation to the historical past, and between one's own and the other, in relation to language – that is the 'paradox of otherness' by making it the subject of drama"(Smith, 1991, 393). This negative attitude to language, Smith argues, is represented in Hugh's character who symbolizes "the sovereign disdain of the English in general". (Smith, 1991, 399).

Apparently, Friel's Translations presents the colonizer's language, in comparison with that of the colonized, as

"alien, foreign, and strange." Yolland: Even if I did speak Irish, I'd always be considered an outsider here, wouldn't I? I may learn the password but the language of the tribe will always elude me, won't it? The private core will always be hermetic, won't it? "(Translations, 1996, 409).

The love affair between the English soldier and the Irish woman is conceived ironically since none of them knows the language of the other. Friel exemplifies the futility of this heterogeneity as represented in Yolland's (the English soldier) inability to express his love to Maire, the Irish woman. Thus, there is no hope of a successful communication between the English soldier and the Irish woman since none of them understands the language of the other. To solve this problem, Yolland thought of learning Gaelic to express his love to his beloved. Friel succeeds in linking the personal tension with cultural dilemma; Yolland's inability to express his interest in Maire signifies a symbolic failure of any communication between England and Ireland:

Yolland...succumbs to the "other". His "momentary sense" is renewed in the naming scene, in his untutored pronunciation of names, and tryst with Maire. His "perfect" appropriation of the names ironically responds to the demand of the "conjugation" with Maire capitalized on this acquisition: repetition of the elements signifies the congruence of mortals and earth (Smith, 1991, 406).

Clearly, the impotence of communication between Yolland and Maire indicates a colonial interpretation. This love affair is seen as a "device" by which Friel symbolized "the clash between a bluntly confident imperialism and uncertainties of collaboration and resistance" (Maxwell, 1990, 9). Moreover, translation is considered as "disloyalty" since translating, according to Friel, is neither "positive", nor "neutral"; instead it is "an act of treason" (Mahony, 1998, 131). This is because when Owen translates the native Irish names of the geographic areas, into "the language of the occupying army, he commits, in the eyes of the villagers, and eventually, in his own eyes, an act of betrayal" (ibid). However, Manus sees translation as nothing but a job that he is paid for:

**Manus:** 'I'm employed as a part-time, underpaid, civilian interpreter. My job is to translate the quaint, archaic tongue you people persist in speaking into the King's good English (Dean, 1984, 404). Friel explicitly draws this comparison between the Irish language versus the English throughout the whole play:

**Manus:** What sort of translation is that, Owen?

**Owen:** Did I make a mess of it?' Manus: 'You weren't saying what Lancey was saying!

**Owen:** Uncertainty in meaning is incipient poetry - who said that?

**Manus:** There was nothing uncertain about what Lancey said: It's a bloody military operation! ...

What's "incorrect" about the place-names we have here?

**Owen:** Nothing at all. They're just going to be standardised'.

**Manus:** You mean changed into English?

**Owen:** Where there's ambiguity, they'll be anglicised. (Translations, 1996, 32).

In other words, through the play, Friel presents "uncompromising" message, which is the Irish themselves, "not the English", who have the right to determine, "which language is spoken in Ireland" (Maxwell, 1990: 9). In addition, this play is seen as a "clever double-take", a "satiric" and "conceit" since the audience of the modern Ireland will realize their "lack [of] proficiency in their own language" (Kiberd, 1996, 616). Friel's satire is revealed because if the Irish

audience laugh at Yolland's inability to express himself to his Irish beloved, "they are indeed laughing at themselves" (ibid).

The failure in communication between the English soldier and his Irish beloved foretells a linguistic failure on the one hand, and it sheds light on the role that the language is expected to perform. In other words, "If art can help us understand this failure of communication at the moment of communication", we can "glimpse the nature of other failures beyond communication which language is trying to accommodate" (Etherton, 1989, 118). Therefore, Friel succeeds in introducing a vision of theatre "to explore failure: in language and in society, this linguistic failure is a "metaphor for social failure" (Etherton, 1989, 148). Likewise, Maxwell supplements this interpretation saying that this "love story, itself complex and moving, reflects the broader historical entanglements." (Maxwell, 1990, 10).

To clarify the social failure of the Irish people's revival of their Gaelic language, the study points out a modern survey about the Irish language done by the Irish government in 1975: the results of this survey are reported by Kiberd who indicates that "despite a widespread love of Irish language, few persons believed that it would survive as a community language into the next century. The statistics were a focus of intense debate in the years that followed, the years in which Translations gestated" (Kiberd, 1996, 616).

Through the linguistic failure, Friel was able to unfold the serious problem of the contemporary Irish society. Boltwood considers Translations as an embodiment of the great cultural loss of the Irish people, Boltwood states that Translation presents an Irish people who "fetishes neither their language nor their culture for its Irishness; rather, they accept English..." (1996, 579).

Introducing language as a main subject for his play, Friel encourages the Irish audience to realize that the Irish language is in a great cultural danger, another dilemma pursuing the post-colonial Ireland. Anderson discusses this issue and states that the Republican government finds an out let from this problematic situation by choosing "bilingualism" and "biculturalism" for the post-colonial Ireland (1991, 133-34). Language is a major marker of the Irish identity, and reserving Irish language is seen as a step in establishing the independence of the Irish cultural identity, and therefore language can play a direct role in resistance against English cultural dominance.

Having "bilingualism" as an alternative for the cultural closure, Marina Tymoczko comments on the bilingualism as "doubleness". She states that this linguistic feature signifies resistance since it enables the language "to say one thing and signify another, or ... to say two things at once. Doubleness is also a characteristic of those who are bilingual, the condition of many Irish people in the twentieth century at present as well" (Tymoczko, 1993, 3)

The Irish language is presented as "an imprisoned" language in a danger of "deformity." This fact is indirectly hinted at in the play through the character of Hugh when he attempts to explain the relation between language and civilization; he says: "it can happen that a civilisation can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape" (Dean, 1984, 419). To solve this problem, Irish writers thought of another option, which is of doubleness, a mid-solution of the Old Gaelic tongue and the modern "dominant" English. Thus, they had either to use an Irish version of English, which includes Gaelic expression, or to be a bi-lingual nation in which both Irish and English are acceptable. Many Irish writers, however, prefer the first option. Dantanus, for example states that, "the English that is spoken in Ireland is and should be distinct from that spoken in England" (Dantanus, 1998, 182). Therefore, this attitude of imposing Irish indigenous words and idioms on English language so that it sounds more Irish than English is also enhanced by Friel who believes that "conventional cultural, psychoanalytic, and linguistic terms can only accommodate the old understanding of the self " (Germanou, 2003, 474).

In a conversation between the English soldier and the Irish citizen this attitude is emphasized, the act of translation is interpreted symbolically “[D] on’t expect too much. I will provide you with the available words and available grammar. But will that help you to interpret between privacies? I have no idea [...] I have no idea at all” (Translations, 1996, 67). Friel introduced the Irish English in his plays; his treatment of English language is always presented as the 'other'. Though there are some references to Standard English, still Irish English is presented as the medium by which all characters communicate:

The language of performance is Irish English, which becomes the medium through which all other languages – including ‘standard English’- are represented throughout Translations (which is now performed throughout the English- speaking world), Friel troubles the "English" surfaces of the play, using Irish English in ways that keep its language "other" to audiences whose English isn't Irish. (Worthen, 1995, 33)

The "national" personality of the Irish language is reflected in Translations. Friel struggles for "self-consciousness"; Irish language has a function as a means of communication; rather it is seen as a tool for resistance. This handling of the language made Irish dramatists consider it as directing the attention to the need of considering language as an identity. So, the love story stands as a metaphor of a failure of communication as well as a social impotency inside the Irish society.

In conclusion, Friel deals with the issue of language from a cultural angle. So language as a means of communication works and sometimes it doesn't work. In Translations, Friel presents Irish language as the "touchstones of culture and as the main medium of society's internal negotiations about identity" (Schmitt, 2012, 1). In other words, Friel's Translations is a challenge to consider all colonized people as "the victims of language instead of history; victims, however, whose loss of speech should point not toward silence, but toward action," and resistance" (Wiley, 1987, 61).

## CONCLUSIONS

In Translations, Friel mixes the personal experience with the national cause of Ireland in a symbolic way. There is a great focus on the politics of language. In other words, language presents the power of the colonizer over the colonized. It can be proposed that, Irish language is viewed as a major marker of the independent Irish identity. This fact is clarified when Friel employs language as a weapon used for resistance. This socio- cultural adoption of language gives this play its value as a postcolonial reality.

From the analysis of the play, the study provided a new reading of Brian Friel's Translations in light of colonial and post colonial cultural criticism. Adopting these theories, the study proved that Friel was able to restore people's nationalism on the one hand, and urged people to show a national awareness toward their language and culture. What is worth noting is that Friel's Translations proved to be a rejection of the colonial treatment of Irish language and culture. The cultural depth proves to be existent as a background for the play, and a firm source of a national identity.

The study asserts the need for more studies that examine the convergent attitudes of the Irish people toward their language. It also pinpoints the need of the Irish people to develop a national awareness to preserve their language by rejecting the English (colonizer's) attitude toward Irish language, and adopting the Irish (nationalist's) attitude toward language and identity. Finally, the play proves that language can play a major role in resistance by linking the Irish people with their cultural roots and heritage.

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